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ABSTRACT

This study explored 22 ninth-grade English students' reading engagement and interpretation of a young adult multicultural novel dealing with biethnic identity development. The descriptive multicase study charted students' literary engagement in an urban technology magnet school and a rural Hawaii high school. The research question was: What are the characteristics of students' writing during the reading and interpretation of a multicultural young adult novel? Detailed analyses of seven students' journal freewriting, character interpretation dialogue journals, and research papers on the novel's cultural authenticity revealed that students: (1) produced more personal and interpretive reactions to the novel than a simple description of events; and (2) students had a strong sense of agency and voice, supported by the reader-based style of teaching in both classes. This study points to the need for students to have opportunities to read and talk about literature that explores ethnic and cultural identity development. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/RS)

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Secondary English Students' Engagement in Reading and Writing About a Multicultural Young Adult Novel

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Secondary English Students' Engagement in Reading and Writing About a Multicultural Young Adult Novel

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore 22 9th-grade English students' reading engagement and interpretation of a young adult multicultural novel dealing with biethnic identity development. This descriptive multicase study charted students' literary engagement in an urban technology magnet school and a rural Hawaii high school. The research question was: What are the characteristics of students' writing during the reading and interpretation of a multicultural young adult novel? Detailed analyses of 7 students' journal freewriting, character interpretation dialogue journals, and research papers on the novel's cultural authenticity revealed that students: (a) produced more personal and interpretive reactions to the novel than simple descriptions of events, and (b) students had a strong sense of agency and voice, supported by the reader-based style of teaching in both classes. This study points to the need for students to have opportunities to read and talk about literature that explores ethnic and cultural identity development.

The purpose of this research was to explore students reading engagement and interpretation of Heartbeat, Drumbeat (Hernandez, 1992), a young adult multicultural novel dealing with biethnic identity development in a Navajo-Hispanic character. Our research team consisted of a literacy professor, a doctoral student in literacy, and two high school English teachers. We charted students' literary engagement in two diverse settings, a technology magnet school in the urban Southwest and a rural high school in Hawaii. Our research question was: What are the characteristics of students' writing during the reading and interpretation of a multicultural young adult novel?

Ninth-graders in both sites read the novel, responded to their reading in a variety of teacher-guided and student-generated ways, and briefly shared some of these literary responses across the two sites using electronic mail. In the technology magnet school site, students used an in-class listserv to discuss the novel. Our planning discussions as a research team occurred mainly through electronic mail. In this paper, we provide a brief overview of the two classroom contexts, descriptive data, and selected vignettes of students' reading response journals and other writing.

Background and Theoretical Rationale

Recent research in reading shows the profound impact frequent reading in a variety of fiction and nonfiction material has on reading achievement and interest in further reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Novels have great potential for engaging high school students in reading at a time when a myriad of competing interests vie for their attention and time. In a theoretical discussion of engagement, Schallert and Reed (1997) made the

observation that: "Stories are good at ambushing a reader because they combine and re-create everyday life events in a narrative sequence that is embellished and made larger than life" (p. 74). They argued that the reader's contribution to re-creating a story is substantial and dependent upon the challenge of discovery as well as the invitation of surprise, ambiguity, and intrigue offered by a good story. However, for many students, this escape into the literary world is unlikely to occur without some exposure to high-powered literature written in language that calls images to mind and entices the reader into the story.

In addition to an engagement perspective, we also grounded our work in literature response theory. Contemporary models of literature response show that readers bring multiple perspectives to the reading and interpretation of a novel (Rosenblatt, 1995). And, while an interpretive stance may encourage or limit the degree of personal engagement with a story (Bean, Readence, & Mallette, 1996), a distant interpretive stance may limit cross-cultural insights that could be gained from reading a multicultural young adult novel. In addition, many years of classroom enculturation may lead students to see a novel as a literary puzzle rather than a story that could have personal significance. This may be particularly limiting when reading a multicultural novel where the central character is exploring her own personal issues such as ethnic identity clarification.

Multicultural Literature

Contemporary definitions of multicultural literature broaden the narrow definitions and marginalization of this literature in the past (Bishop, 1997; Diamond & Morre, 1995). Bishop (1997) argued

that "multicultural literature should be defined in a comprehensive and inclusive manner; that is it should include books that reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and the world" (p.3). Nevertheless, there is a stark absence of multicultural literature in the literary canon (Godina, 1996) and relatively little research exploring multicultural literature in content area classrooms (Bean, 1999). When multicultural literature is included in classrooms, it has the potential to engage students in the lives of characters that may mirror their own experiences. Multicultural literature may expand students' understanding of people from other ethnicities and cultures (Godina, 1996).

Multicultural literature often challenges simplistic assimilationist views of ethnic identity and illustrates a variety of character responses to conflict resolution (Bean, Valerio, Mallette, & Readence, in press). Careful teacher guidance in the early stages of reading and responding to multicultural literature seems crucial.

Our work is also informed by a recent study contrasting reader-based and teacher-centered approaches to literary engagement with 10th-graders (Newell, 1996). Newell argued that only a thin body of research casts light on the impact of writing on students' literary understanding. Prior studies showed a uniform trend in English teachers controlling the direction, pace, and organization of classroom discussion and writing. Newell sought to contrast this form of instruction with small group and process writing activities that are more reader-based. Newell's study revealed that 10th-graders in a reader-based classroom used essay writing

as a way to associate events in a short story with their own life experiences. They produced significantly more interpretive and personal associations than their counterparts in a teacher-centered approach to literature. Newell developed a well-grounded and reliable coding system for categorizing literary discussion and process writing responses that we found particularly applicable to our work. We elected to use this system rather than generating our own categories because we felt Newell's work would provide a good benchmark to gauge our descriptive data against. We describe this category system in greater detail in the methods section that follows.

Method

Participants

Two 9th-grade English classes, one in the Southwest and the other in Hawaii, read and responded to a multicultural young adult novel. The Southwest technology magnet school (hereafter called Cybertech High School) class was taught by Helen and the Hawaii class by Fern, co-authors. Helen has significant prior experience teaching ESL as a bilingual teaching aide in bilingual classrooms in Florida and Los Angeles schools. More recently, Helen taught secondary English for 3 years in the Southwest.

Cybertech High has a total of 750 students enrolled, commuting to the campus from a wide urban area. The school's mission is to develop a high degree of technical skill in using computers as crucial learning tools to analyze, synthesize, and manipulate information in various disciplines. Each classroom is well equipped with computers for every student. Cybertech is a comprehensive urban high school with regular, honors, and advanced

placement courses. Students select from 7 program areas including: Banking and Finance, Law-related careers, Computer Design, Computer Science, Management Information Systems, Systems Technology, Systems Technology Support, and Technology Applications. Students are selected to attend Cybertech by a committee based on their completed application, report card, teacher recommendations, and program space availability.

Fern, at the Hawaii site (hereafter called Kawela High School), has significant professional experiences in the school and rural ranching community as a Title I Aide before completing her secondary certification. She has a national and statewide reputation as a champion rodeo and western pleasure rider and trainer. Computer support at Kawela High mirrors the realities of many high schools where efforts are underway to improve upon limited e-mail and internet access. Students could, when available, use two computers in the library. However, as a research team, we each had office and home computers to facilitate planning via e-mail.

The first two authors served as participant-observers in the Nevada site and the first author visited with Fern to discuss data analysis at the Hawaii site.

A total of 22 students participated in the study. There were 12 students at Cybertech High with 6 males and 5 females. Ethnicity included Hispanic, Chinese-American, African-American, East Indian, and European-American students. At Kawela High, there were 10 students in the study with 1 male and 9 females. Ethnicity included Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese, Portuguese, Blackfoot Indian, Samoan, Japanese, Marshalese and European-American. All 22

students were involved in various facets of the study and our summary data includes this larger picture of the two classroom sites. Writing samples from 7 students, 4 at Cybertech High and 3 from Kawela High are used to illustrate patterns in students' responses to the novel.

Materials and Procedures

The students read and responded to the novel Heartbeat Drumbeat (Hernandez, 1992). The novel was published by Arte Publico Press. This publisher strives to publish non-stereotypical insider's perspectives of multicultural experiences. The novel describes the main character, Morgana Cruz's, search for her ethnic identity encompassing both Hispanic and Navajo cultures. Early in the novel, Morgana, a potter by trade, comments on her Navajo mentor, Isadora:

> Isadora, my master, taught me much, but I prefer not to use her teaching except in regards to pottery. You see, because my parents are of two different races, I have to blend in with both worlds in order to survive. (p. 65)

This episode and others became focal points for students' literary responses and a variety of ways of coming to know the cultures represented. The criteria we used for selecting this novel were derived from previous studies and centered on culturally conscious character representation (Bean et. al., in press).

In our role as participant-observers, we each kept a journal of reflections and field-notes along with printed copies of all our e-mail conversations. Student data included: (a) journal freewriting, including autobiographies; (b) character

interpretation dialogue journal entries based on key probe questions; and, (c) a research paper on the cultural authenticity of the Navajo ceremonies in the novel. In this paper we focus on the student reading response journals to key episodes in the novel and briefly allude to the other literature response activities to illuminate discourse patterns and themes we saw emerging in the student journals. Journal writing was a common activity across the two sites while the research paper was completed by students at Cybertech High.

Our analysis began with the first author reading and rereading the Kawela High and Cybertech High student journals to gain an overall sense of students' response to the novel (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). Following this initial impressionistic reading, journals were reread and coded by the first two authors using an adapted version of Newell's (1996) literacy response categories. Newell's broad categories include: (a) descriptive statements (simply retelling the story); (b) personal statements (reacting to the form or story content with one's opinion); (c) associative statements (autobiographical narrative connecting the novel and writer's experiences in the world); (d) interpretive statements (speculating on motives and actions of characters; (e) evaluative statements (affective and aesthetic reactions to the novel); (f) cultural reference statements (drawing parallels to one's own culture); and (g) miscellaneous statements. Newell's research showed this system to be reliable for exploring literacy response patterns in classrooms. Interrater agreement was 87% (Newell, 1996). These categories were triangulated through additional reading of the journals by the second author, a doctoral student

in literacy, and e-mail and regular mail summaries of the ongoing data analysis shared with Helen and Fern for confirmation or disconfirmation.

Results

Journal Freewriting

Students responded to three key sections of the novel in their journals. First, in chapter 8, where Morgana Cruz says: "Isadora, my master, taught me much, but I prefer not to use her teaching except in regards to pottery. You see, because my parents are of two different races, I have to blend in with both worlds in order to survive" (Hernandez, 1992, p. 65). Secondly, chapter 12, where despite Morgana's initial rejection of Eagle Eyes' role in her mentor's Navajo burial ceremony, they begin to develop a close bond. Finally, students reacted to Morgana's epiphany near the end of the book where she realizes: "For years she had considered herself an outcast, not really belonging to her mother's clan. She now realized that she had branded herself" (p.131). Students selected other sections of each chapter to write about in their journals too, but these key episodes formed the basis for much of the discussion and writing that occurred, particularly in the Cybertech High site.

Based on a total of 21 journal entries across the 7 students considered in this analysis, 48% of their entries fell in the interpretive category; 23% demonstrated personal reactions, 14% were evaluative, 10% consisted of simple description, and 5% made cultural connections. Thus, these students read and wrote about key episodes in the novel at a high level of interpretive

response. The following participant examples best illustrate this observation.

Crystal, one of the Hawaii students, offered this interpretive statement about Morgana's belief that she must blend in with both worlds in order to survive: "This passage shows the difficulty of being two different races. For anyone in this case, there must be a level of frustration, because you have to try so much harder in order to get the same respect." Casey, another Hawaii student, viewed Morgana's surprise to find, near the end of the book, that she was well accepted by her Navajo family as follows:

> With the coming of marriage in the Navajo custom, Morgana becomes part of the clan which she thought she wasn't part of. Until she finds that she was already into it. To me, this part makes Morgana very happy because she was part of the clan when she didn't even know it.

The Hawaii students displayed intense affective responses to the novel, as well as exuberance and a sense of agency engagement in their responses. They talked about the characters in terms of real, living people and wrote to Fern, their teacher with enthusiasm. For example, when Casey wrote about Morgana Cruz's perception that she needed to blend in with both Hispanic and Navajo cultures, she offered this personal association:

> I would have to say that Morgana is doing a pretty good job in blending in with both because her mother is a Navajo and her mentor is trying to teach Morgana the Navajo way. I though, don't know how it feels like to have and follow two races. Because I believe I have only one.

Casey is Filipino and Fern, her teacher wrote back: "Casey-then it's all the more valuable that you experience through literature the challenges and choices and joy of diversity in cultural heritage. Your own sensitivity and insight provide you with great understanding and compassion."

Shyann, another student who wrote in her autobiography about her Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese, Spanish, German, and Portuguese ethnicity made the evaluative comment that:

> This book was really enjoyable. I really liked it. It took me to a whole new level. Everything was interesting and there were things to learn about Indian cultures. I would really recommend this book to all students even adults!

The Cybertech students' journals also displayed real interest and excitement about the novel, despite confessions in their autobiographies that they preferred video games and outdoor activities to reading. For example, one student stated:

> I hate to be inside and mostly on the weekends. I also hate to read and to do homework. Reading is the number one thing that I hate. Homework I don't mind as much as I do reading. I only read when I have to.

It is important to note that students at this magnet school carry a heavy course load with substantial outside reading assignments.

When Morgana marries her former nemesis, Eagle Eyes, an accomplished attorney, in a traditional Navajo ceremony, he later carries her across the threshold to their house. Since this is a Western custom, Morgana comments on it and Eagle Eyes says: "We are of both worlds so we can get away with things that others

cannot" (p. 132). Araceli, a Cybertech student who is Hispanic, resonated with this scene saying: "This is true they got advantages that others don't have."

Throughout their journaling, students treated the characters and events as if they were real. The novel captivated their interest and enthusiasm, despite some professed disdain for reading.

In addition to the journal freewriting completed at Cybertech High and Kawela High School, students at Cybertech had daily access to multiple computers in class connected to the teacher's central classroom computer in a listserv fashion. These students carried on an electronic discussion of the novel based on dialogue journal freewriting prompts created by their teacher. The following observations emerged from our reading and rereading of these one to two paragraph length interpretations.

Character Interpretation Dialogue Journal Entries

Helen at Cybertech High, asked her students to respond to the following prompts in a dialog journal for discussion over the in-class listserv: (a) Describe your heritage and how it influences your character, life style, actions and/or beliefs; (b) What are some stereotypes you've either been influenced by or have had to overcome based on your gender? (c) What effect have they had on you, and how has who you are been defined by these experiences?; (d) Describe Morgana's heritage. How does this and her heritage influence her character, life style, actions and/or beliefs? How do these things define who she is?; (e) Morgana says "I have to blend with both worlds in order to survive" What does she mean by this? What significance does this have to the novel?; and, (f) Prove that you are an individual.

In their first writing prompt, students were asked to "Describe Morgana's heritage. How does her heritage influence her character, life style, actions and or beliefs? How do these things define who she is?"

Students wrote their responses on the computers, saved them and then a classmate reacted to what another student said. In some cases, students argued that Morgana was simply trying to please everyone in her life, whether Navajo or Hispanic. Others felt she was a victim of stereotyping and actually a very strong person inspite of the limitations placed on her by others' biases. For example, Araceli wrote:

> Morgana's heritage is something very hard for her, I think. Because she is half Mexican and half Indian. Because of her being a half breed she has to do both things. What I mean is since she is a Mexican she has to act like one. She still has to do all of those traditions, customs that Mexicans do. By being half a Indian she also has to do all of the things that a Indian would do and I feel Morgana is very confused because of this. This influences her beliefs because by being part Indian she has to go along with what Eagle Eyes is doing by having her those four days and not letting her communicate with others. Because this is one of the beliefs that the Indians have.
>
> By being part of a Mexican she had a Quinceanera. Having a Quinceanera when you turn fifteen is one of the traditions that the Mexicans have. The Quinceanera is the big party that your parents throw for you and in which you invite family and friends.

In this instance, Helen, the teacher wrote a response:

I also believe that she is confused and that the Mexican traditions have pretty much ruled her life. Doesn't she still have a responsibility to herself to get to know who she is? Will she always be led around by someone, or is she going to take the initiative and go find out how she is? To do this, we first need to do a few things. She needs to learn exactly what it is that her culture is all about (both of them). Then, Morgana needs to decide how these two very different ways of life feel to her (which one feels right deep down in her soul?). At this point in her life, Morgana is nothing but a follower. I can not say precisely to what extent her heritage and gender have influenced her because I don't think that she is anything more than a one dimensional character at this point. She has no individuality and her life is run by everyone, but herself.

This climate of give and take permeated all the interchanges that occurred. Students often complimented one another, sometimes agreeing with an interpretive position and, at other times, providing a counterpoint perspective. Some students viewed Morgana as a strong person, others saw her as driven to please everyone but herself. These varying viewpoints made for lively discussion and a climate that made the characters in the novel come alive.

In their second writing prompt, students responded to one of the key quotes they considered in their journal freewriting from page 65 where Morgana says: "I have to blend with both worlds in order to survive" (Hernandez, 1992, p. 65). Helen asked students to

indicate "What she means by this? And, What significance does this have to the novel?"

Students' written discussion of this quote showed they leaned toward the view that Morgana walked a tightrope between Navajo and Hispanic cultures. Students felt she tried to placate both parents by shifting into the cultural mode required so she could avoid problems with her parents.

While students agreed on Morgana's balancing act between two cultures, they didn't always agree with one another's written opinions. For example, when one student wrote: "She will always have to blend in. This means she will always use one culture more than the other but in order to survive she will have to believe in both," Araceli challenged these contradictory statements. She wrote:

> O.K. well I don't fully agree with your last line. I don't think that she will always use one culture more than the other.... I think that Morgana may feel that in order to survive she is going to have to treat both of the cultures the same. Because she is part of both, she is influenced by both.

Other students chose to personalize Morgana's experiences, commenting on their monocultural families but relating to Morgana's ethnic identity journey through classmates with bicultural experiences.

Research Paper on Cultural Authenticity

In an effort to encourage her students to read against the grain (Temple, 1993), Helen designed a research paper assignment around the question: "Is Irene Beltran Hernandez's portrayal of Navajo

ceremonies in the novel Heartbeat Drumbeat accurate?" The Kawela High students did not undertake this particular assignment as their curriculum design progressed to other readings.

The students at Cybertech High had to research this question using a combination of Internet resources, the library, and the local Native American Center. For example, Araceli found that the Kinaalda rite of passage ceremony was accurate but she questioned the veracity of the marriage ceremony.

> Some of the things that were not included in the novel that were suppose to be, during the ceremony was that they, Eagle Eyes and Morgana, were suppose to wash their hands. They were suppose to stay in the hogan four days and four nights, but they didn't.

Students cited Internet resources, including: The Navajo Nation, 1996. (http://www.americawest.com/pages/navajo2.htm/). In addition, various books from the library were consulted, including: Osinski, A. (1987). The Navajo. Chicago: Children's Press.

Students read these sources carefully and reflectively, discerning problems in some areas of cultural representation. For example, one student pointed out that Isadora was not a chief and, therefore, should not have been buried as she was.

Rafael explored Navajo gender roles as portrayed in the novel. He raised some interesting issues by questioning whether or not modern Navajo men would behave in the same way as Eagle Eyes.

> The new Navajo are different from the old Navajo men. Now they treat their woman with great attention, consider them equal....

> The woman is the real owner of all the sheep, and the men dare not dispose of them without their permission.

Later in his paper, Rafael said: "The new Navajo is nothing like the book talks about them.... Most women like the new Navajo better. The reason for that is he is kind and gentle."

Thus, students delved into the accuracy of the novel's key episodes and found, in some cases, that fictionalized accounts reshaped ceremonies to fit the dramatic intent of the novel. The dramatic interplay of Morgana and Eagle Eyes sometimes takes precedent over more contemporary gender roles in real Navajo culture. For example, one student said,

> My research did show some similarity between the novel and what really happens, however it seemed to show more differences than anything.... Navajo women have more "liberated" positions in society than most people think. In the novel the men owned and controlled everything, however I have found that women and men have joint ownership and either of them may sell or trade what the husband wants.

Students in both sites were encouraged to interpret the characters' actions with a critical eye. Through the journal freewriting and dialogue journals, they questioned assumptions, values, and beliefs that emerged as Morgana sought to integrate her ethnic identity. Her quest captured their interest and resulted in substantial interpretive writing, particularly at Cybertech High.

Discussion

We explored secondary English students' interpretation of the young adult novel, Heartbeat, Drumbeat (Hernandez, 1992) from an

engagement perspective. Students at Cybertech High School in the Southwest, and Kawela High in Hawaii, displayed enthusiasm and connectedness in their reading and writing about the novel. This was demonstrated in students' journal entries where the frequency of interpretive and personal reactions outpaced simple description statements. In addition, qualitative analyses of students' journal entries showed they felt of sense of agency (Moore, 1996) in reading and interpreting the novel. Students in both sites felt empowered to agree or disagree among themselves and with their teachers. They also tended to view Morgana Cruz and Eagle Eyes as real people, perhaps attesting to the power of Hernandez's lyrical writing style. They contrasted their own sense of ethnic identity with the struggles Morgana experienced as a Navajo-Hispanic character. In their journal exchanges, they sometimes complimented one another and, at other times, adamantly defended contrasting positions.

In the Cybertech High site, much of this discussion took place through writing that was saved on a listserv in Helen's class where students could read and react to each others' entries. We had initially hoped to explore this electronic conversation across the two school sites. However, the Kawela High School site had limited access to the Internet. Our research team used campus and personal e-mail accounts to plan our work but Kawela High students, until recently, had few opportunities or experiences in using e-mail. Equity in access to the Internet remains a national problem and a source of frustration for many teachers (Mike, 1996). This is especially problematic when we know that technologically rich classrooms are often language rich because of

the multiple opportunities to write to real audiences and build learning communities (Maring, Wiseman, & Myers, 1997).

A number of classroom characteristics served to encourage a strong reader-response stance and sense of agency in both classrooms. In a synthesis of work on influential teachers, Ruddell (1997) noted that teachers who operate from a constructivist perspective where they use high level questions combined with an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1995), encourage students' motivation and engagement. Students in these classrooms become absorbed in the literature they read and feel a strong sense of empowerment to state their interpretive opinions. In both classes in this study, students displayed contrasting viewpoints and a strong sense of voice. This is an important finding because students who feel they are empowered to talk and write about their reading are more likely to engage in reading (Almasi, 1996). Opportunities to read and write about engaging literature impacts students' achievement and performance on national assessments of literacy (Bean, 1999). Perhaps most importantly, reading and discussing a powerful novel like Heartbeat Drumbeat (Hernandez, 1992) causes students to look at themselves differently as individuals and learners (Almasi, 1996). They are able to find their critical voices through this experience.

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